

Antoinette the Outsider: The Representation of Hybridity and Mimicry in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract: This essay sets out to study the function of hybridity and mimicry in Jean Rhys's acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical framework in this regard. In this novel, Antoinette emerges as the "Other" who aims to prove herself to the "Centre". Undergoing extreme sufferings, the heroine wistfully ponders mimicry as an impulse to break out of her mare's nest and to establish herself within one culture. Indeed, unlike what Bhabha believes mimicry cannot upset the total authority of the "Centre". Meanwhile, Antoinette used it as a result of her longings for the position of the "Centre" which she is unable to attain because of her hybrid existence. Countering Homi K. Bhabha's central argument, this essay contends that Antoinette's mimicry of Englishness fails to fend off the norms of the superior power, but partakes in celebrating the very ideals that Bhabha's theory is trying to keep at bay.

1. Introduction

"So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all." [20]

Jean Rhys, born Ella Gwendolyn Rees Williams (1890 -1979), was a Dominican mid-twentieth-century writer and novelist. She was neither European, nor Black but White and West Indian, an ethnicity which stamped her personality as an outsider. Regarding this exotic background, the opposing forces of society made Jean sing a different tune to life. The author lived a long life but it was her childhood in the Caribbean that molded her personality as a writer. Crushed by the harsh nickname of the "White cockroach", Jean mirrored the West Indian heroine of her chef-d'oeuvre, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She once declared "I have only ever written about myself" [6]. In her study of Rhys's life and work, Carole Angier asserts that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Mrs. Rochester's story; but it is also, of course, Jean's story. It is Jean's whole story" [2]. Like Antoinette, she also bent under the pressure of the colonial "Centre", England.

Served as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* gave vent to the bewildered thoughts of Edward Rochester's "mad woman in the attic". Antoinette (alias Bertha) is that woman, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the reopening of her case before her nightmarish cul-de-sac at Thornfield Hall. As Thomas Loe asserts, "The novel rewards those who give it not just a careful close reading, but who also explore its potential for extra-textual stories and avenues of meaning" [16]. In these words, as noted in *Jane Eyre*, the Caribbean Bertha is seen through the eyes of Rochester, her English rival:

Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations. Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!--as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. [5]

However, as Faizal Forrester maintains, “for Rhys, Bertha is someone quite different: she is a woman who is mad, not a trivial symbol” [11]. Thus, in rebuttal to this trivialization, the West Indian Rhys wrote her solicitous prequel, coining a new name for the madwoman (Antoinette), and returning her back to the Caribbean Island. According to Bender, “On the simplest level, we can imagine *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an attempt to render justice, to present the alien woman’s point of view and plead her case, or to explain plausibly how she and her husband have got to the sorry state evident in *Jane Eyre*” [3].

Deeply swayed by her Creole legacy, Antoinette resembles the typical portrait of a hybrid individual cut in between the flux of two different cultures. Unlike Brontë arraying a narrative of inclusion where the protagonists are created within the scope of Englishness, Jean Rhys plots a narrative of exclusion where the non-English strives to achieve Englishness but it has disaster written all over it. Therefore, through its dual narrative, the latter regards scrupulous attention to the sentiments of the included and the excluded, the colonizer and the colonized.

In his *Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority)” [4]. He further remarks that “the display of hybridity - its peculiar ‘replication’ – terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery” [4]. Therefore, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” [4]. Indeed, he considers mimicry as the post-colonial process of destabilizing the norms of the colonizer which complicates the authority of the original.

Countering the aforementioned argument, this essay contends that Antoinette’s mimicry of Englishness does not work to fend off the norms of the superior power, but to partake in celebrating the very ideals that Bhabha’s theory is trying to keep at bay. In other words, instead of attempting to use mimicry as a tool for upsetting the norms of the colonizer, Antoinette longs for their accepted position in society and what she is unable to obtain because of her hybrid existence. Moreover, in search of a true identity, she yearns to establish herself within two opposing cultures, but ultimately, neither of them welcomes her and she turns out to be an “Other” to all.

1.1 Literature Review

As one of the most intensively studied tour de forces, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has mesmerized the British literature circle. Many critics and scholars have esteemed the literary value of Rhys’ masterpiece and have attempted to analyze the text in the light of various critical approaches. However, concerning Antoinette’s identity crisis, different scholars zoom on this issue from different perspectives. For example, C. M. Mardorossian discusses *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s articulation of identity “in the context of a debate that has been waged within feminist postcolonial studies around the representation of racial otherness” [17]. Eliana Ionoaia in “The Creolization of The Self: From *Jane Eyre* to *Wide Sargasso Sea*” emphasizes identity crisis while comparing *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* [14]. Some scholars like Liping Chen points out that the phantasmatic nature of White identity calls forth a state of identity crisis for the hybrid [8]. Others, like Lida Pollanen, introduce the notion of abjection to survey Antoinette’s crisis and to contend how it “actually operates in a colonial and patriarchal society” [18]. Laine Remignanti illustrates “the precise and evocative imagery of hair as the primary vehicle of gender, racial, and national identity”, while Huggan and Tiffin highlight the ambiguity of her identity with the ambiguity of pastoral imagery used in the novel [2, 13]. Additionally, Edna Aizenberg stresses the identity crisis undergone by Antoinette through her zombification in the hands of the imperial society [1].

In general, although a number of essays have aimed to probe into different factors of this critical condition, few of them have drawn upon the concepts of hybridity and mimicry while discussing Antoinette’s process of identification. Hence I try to analyze these concepts drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s theoretical framework.

2. Discussion

2.1 The Quest for Identity: Hybridity and Isolation

Referring to mixture, in its most basic sense, “hybridity derives from biological and botanical usages and is subsequently employed in linguistics and racial theory in the nineteenth century” [22]. Its discussion traverses across numerous disciplines, however, the most salient of all emerges in Post-colonial literature which zooms in the effects of mixture on identity and culture. Homi K. Bhabha believes that the roots of hybridity are located in culture. He maintains that cultural hybridity “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” [4]. He has called hybridity “the Third space”, where a dialogue between two different cultures is established and our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force” is challenged [4]. Therefore, from his perspective, hybridity helps the richness of culture and intellect. However, Rhys’s novel is a case in disagreement with Bhabha’s speculations in this regard. In fact, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to be a Creole or a “Hybrid” is essentially negative. Suffering from a troubled identity, the hybrids are mostly regarded as outsiders. This novel revolves around Antoinette, a hybrid female who is rebuffed both within her birthplace, the Caribbean island, and later in England, where she married an English man. Keeping the woman under close surveillance, we find her miserably de trop to both black and white. The heroine could never cherish the hope that she would one day be an English woman; neither will she ever be a true West Indian. Therefore, belonging to everywhere and nowhere creates a homeless outsider who is the target of hostile discrimination. As Hellen Carr rightly suggests, “Homelessness is the terrain of Rhys’s fiction, dealing as it does with those who belong nowhere, between cultures, between histories” [7]. But unlike many postcolonial critics, including Bhabha, Rhys is hesitant to celebrate this hybridity and, more, is critical of its threats.

The imperial system pressures the hybrids to kowtow to the dictates of the British while viewing them as no more than distant imperial objects – never domestically English. Antoinette is a victim of imperial colonialism, “one of the purest forms of cultural destruction and mass human denigration” [12]. Thus, her hybrid nature thwarts her attempts to identify with the English and places her in the zone of the others. Erica Johnson calls our attention to the line between Englishness and otherness when she maintains, “Rhys is careful to show how the history of colonialism operates in such a way that Creole characters never achieve the same sense of national or even geographical identity that the English characters possess” [15]. Yet her stepfather to whom she referred as Mr. Mason, “so without a doubt English” [20], is always in effort to Anglicize the Cosway women, being negligent of the fact that they are without a doubt not English.

Partly the heroine's inability to successfully fuse with the English culture and thereby create an identity, has roots in her childhood family's impoverished state. In the eyes of the black islanders of the West Indies, whiteness is correlated with the prosperous planter class. In that case, Tia, the black Caribbean girl whom she tries to befriend, jeers at her underprivileged status saying, “Real white people, they got gold money. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger” [20]. The reference to “old time white people” stands for Antoinette's decedents. Before the Emancipation Act, they were wealthy slave owners whose familiarity and sexual relationship with the slaves have contaminated their whiteness and social status.

Antoinette’s ambiguity of skin color also contributes to her exclusion from an English identity when she reflects, “It was a song about a white cockroach. That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders” [20]. Or elsewhere her husband recounts how he overheard one of the housemaids singing, “*The white cockroach she marry, The white cockroach she buy young man*” [20].

Antoinette’s quest for identity is further suppressed by the husband’s attempts to demote her to the realm of sexual objects. Realizing that Rochester is manipulating her to his racial other the heroine remarks, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to take me into someone else, calling me by another name” [20]. His other nickname for Antoinette, “Marionette,” assigned her the role of a doll-wife. Patrick Hogan believes that the nickname signifies “a mere manipulated thing, a puppet, a

piece of wood, without reflection or autonomous action, without social connectedness (beyond mere manipulation), without identity” [20]. Even when she strives to rub shoulders with the black community, she is prevented by both the blacks and her husband. For example, when Coulibri is fired and she runs to join her friend Tia, she throws a stone at the heroine’s face and signals her rebuff of the black society [20]. This is reflected in what Sternlicht terms Antoinette’s “double isolation”. She identifies “with Blacks, the very people who at the moment are oppressing her” and tries to be a ‘self-appointed member of the group ... that has rejected her’ [21]. Rochester albeit will not let his wife establish herself among the blacks and his disapproval of Antoinette speaking patois with the black servant Christophine oozes through his voice [20]. Therefore, Antoinette’s English leanings, along with Tia’s cold-shouldering and Rochester’s scolding, preclude her assimilation with black people, while her birth and associations with the former slaves exclude her from identifying with the English community, too.

More to the point, Rhys –consciously or unconsciously– espouses Antoinette’s view of the blacks as racially inferior. She portrays Antoinette shamefacedly for her black relations (half siblings) and also displays an English revulsion of miscegenation when she caught sight of a black servant kissing her mother. According to Hogan, this anxiety demonstrates that “the racial dyad of white and black is always there at the back of her mind, always warping and structuring conceptions and relations” [12].

The writer even points to Antoinette's fear of hybrid features when Antoinette is chased by the biracial boy. She depicts him as having “a white skin, a dull ugly white covered with freckles, his mouth was a negro’s mouth and worst, most horrible of all, his hair was crinkled, a negro’s hair, but bright red and his eyebrows and eyelashes were red” [20]. In fact, toggling between desiring and deriding black, white and hybrid; she never succeeds to harmonize them. Therefore, being foiled in every attempt to identify with her racial others, Antoinette uses mimicry as his last resort to establish herself within one culture.

2.2 Mimicry: An impulse for achieving higher social identification

Mimicry is when members of a colonized society imitate the language, manners and lifestyle of their colonizers. It is mostly regarded as something disgraceful, and a person engaged in it is usually ridiculed by the other members of the community. According to Collins English Dictionary one of the most insulting terms referring to the brown people who act like the white is “coconut” [9]. Thus, historically speaking almost no colonized ever thought of oneself as positively engaged in mimicry and neither did our heroine, Antoinette. For in the eyes of both the colonizer and the colonized, it is not a sign of superiority but rather a sign of weakness. Moreover, it is unlikely of a colonized to take on the very method for destabilizing the superior power when there are often more plausible ways.

However, in his *Location of Culture*, Bhabha considers mimicry to be a positive concept and a tool that the colonized uses to destabilize the overarching power of the colonizer. He defines mimicry as “*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*”, and contends that “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” [4, 4]. Thus, it displays the necessary deformation of all signs of discrimination and domination. He further mentions that mimicry “problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the “national” is no longer naturalizable”, that is to say, mimicry exposes the artificiality behind the symbolic expressions of power. In that case, the mimic men are “the figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as ‘inappropriate’ colonial subjects” [4, 4]. Nevertheless, Bhabha’s argument at least in the case of this novel is not pragmatic. Since by displaying the heroine as constantly attempting to differentiate herself from the blacks and making herself appear more white and more English, Rhys has made her character sanguinely imitate the non-Caribbean vogue. Nonetheless, Antoinette fruitlessly considers mimicry a tool which can assign her higher social identification.

When Mr. Mason “so sure of himself, so without a doubt English” marries her mother, Antoinette remarks, “We ate English food now, beef and mutton, pies and puddings. I was glad to be like an

English girl but I missed the taste of Christophine's cooking" [20]. In fact, basking in the cheers of having a culture, Antoinette struggles to escape from the third space of being an incognita. Here the girl's aberration from the non-Caribbean taste signifies her sense of cultural otherness and her physical distinction from the native English people. But there is no sign of mimicry which "marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance.", or no hint at the time when "the words of the master become the ... the warlike, subaltern sign of the native." [4, 4]. Later, during her time at the convent, Antoinette endeavors to trace her desired identity by mimicking the images of the young women's hair: "Please, Helene, tell me how you do your hair, because when I grow up I want mine to look like yours" [20]. As Erwin argues, "she strives to assume the identity of her racial Other" [10]. And unlike what Bhabha maintains that "Mimicry represents an ironic compromise" [4], there is no signs of irony in her request. In fact, instead of attempting to use mimicry as a tool for toppling down the codes of the superior powers, she longs for their accepted position in society and what she cannot obtain because of her hybrid existence. Antoinette's unsuccessful pursuit of incorporating those images into her own identity is also indicative of her isolation from society.

Elsewhere, Rhys shows the heroine absorbed in her favorite picture of "The Miller's Daughter", and trying to simulate her. The picture represents a "lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes and a dress slipping off her shoulders" [20]. Mardorossian asserts, to Antoinette "The Miller's Daughter" is a representation of the true English woman and one of the few clues she has on how to appeal to Edward [17]. Nonetheless, her husband defines his wife as an ugly colored patch stuck on his immaculate culture: "She was wearing the white dress I had admired, but it had slipped untidily over one shoulder and seemed too large for her. I watched her holding her left wrist with her right hand, an annoying habit" [20]. Indeed, acting as an English woman, Antoinette tries to capture her husband's heart and grant him the view of the woman he would admire, but as Mardorossian continues, "Antoinette herself is incapable of realizing that in Rochester's eyes, her attire actually associates her with (black) female sexual wantonness and prostitution" [17].

After all, Bhabha maintains that the act of colonial mimicry is based upon ambivalence: an uncertainty of difference between the colonizer and the colonial body. Thus, by constructing a colonial other and emphasizing "its slippage, its excess, its difference" post-colonial authors can undermine the notions of colonial difference that preceded them [4]. Notwithstanding this theory, such a process is not sustained enough to distort the imperialist ideals. For there is so great a dichotomy between Englishness and otherness that the author is unable to question the authenticity of difference. Rather, in this novel the young woman uses imitation as the sole arena of struggle in favor of creating a sense of self or in some cases to save her marital life but she fails. While in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester remarks that it was Bertha's sexual "excesses [that] had prematurely developed the germs of insanity" [5], this novel signals that her insanity is the result of both being a hybrid and trying to embrace the vast scope of two different cultures. Therefore, reaching its apogee with the crisis, she is accepted by neither cultures and resolves to secure her identity in flames.

3. Conclusion

The onset of this novel is the onset of the question of "White or Black?" and hence when you are in between, you are a "Nobody". The time passes and now people are cultured, you can be a "white cockroach" or a "coconut", but still not anybody. Jean Rhys's heroine is one among millions of nobodies in the world who find themselves in the turmoil of two opposing cultures while striving to feel at home in one. Even Bhabha's *Location of Culture* fails to practically locate them in one or any. Therefore, like many others, Antoinette struggles to reprieve from all that is not purely White or purely Black. The Imperial Society taught her that the ambiguous cultural elements and ambivalent feelings hardly can coexist; leading her to believe that this troubled identity is a result of hybridity in both her origins and surroundings. Rhys reflects the lessons of her society by displaying the heroine's constant, albeit failed, struggles to imitate whiteness. When Rochester realized that

Antoinette falls short of the standards of his ideal English woman, he chooses to relegate her to a silent puppet. He always points to the peculiar marks that both cultures have left on his wife and regards her as a threat to the “purity” of his own. Therefore, unable to extinguish the oncoming fire of both cultures, the heroine uses mimicry as a technique, not for toppling the imperial privilege of the Centre, but for asserting herself through one voice and being welcomed forever. Finally, despite what Bhabha believes, in the case of this novel, mimicry is celebrated as an impulse which can assign higher social identification.

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